

Criminal Investigations

A Forensic Archeology Case Study from Connecticut

Recent state legislation in Connecticut has provided for professional archeological involvement when unmarked burials are accidentally encountered during construction and other land-altering activities or as a result of cemetery vandalism. As a result, the Office of State Archaeology at the University of Connecticut (Storrs) and the State Historic Preservation Office have provided technical assistance to law enforcement agencies throughout the state. Most notably, criminal trespass at the Chauncey family crypt at the Indian Hill Cemetery in Middletown, Connecticut, evolved into a case study where forensic archeological and anthropological techniques were employed to assist municipal police to understand the nature of the vandalism, to provide information on the sequence of criminal events, to sort skeletal remains disturbed during the vandalism, and to restore the desecrated family crypt as near as possible to its original condition.

In August 1991, the state archeologist was notified that a human skull had been discovered in a wooded area behind a car wash facility in Cromwell, Connecticut. This discovery appeared to be linked to a different on-going investigation that was being conducted by the Middletown Police Department, which requested our technical assistance in identifying this unusual find.

The specimen consisted of a single human cranium (the part of the skull that includes the bone face, upper jaw, and vault areas). No mandible or lower jaw was present. The discovery

was considered to be “old bone” by the Office of State Archaeology in that it contained little organic matter and exhibited a breakdown of the cortical/periosteal surface. Although the skull was found lying on the surface of the ground in a wooded area, it showed no signs of weathering, bleaching, rodent gnawing, or other marks indicative of exposure. In addition, the skull gave no evidence of soil adherence or plant root development in any cranial foramina. Thus, it had been neither buried in the ground, nor exposed to the elements for any length of time. Age, sex, and racial estimates strongly suggested an adult, white female, probably 45 to 55 years old. All dentition was lost perimortem. Cause of death or other pathological conditions could not be discerned.

After preliminary analysis by the Office of State Archaeology, the police requested further technical assistance with an on-going investigation of vandalism at a family crypt in a Middletown cemetery. Police investigators had been working the case for a number of months and questioned whether the Cromwell skull could have originated from the Chauncey family crypt at Indian Hill Cemetery. One investigative “lead” involved certain individuals of known satanic cult associations whose motive for the break-in and vandalism would be to obtain a human skull for ritual purposes.

The Chaunceys were a very prominent early New England family, emigrating from England by 1638. The Chauncey lineage includes the second president of Harvard College, the first full-term graduate of Yale College, celebrated ministers, and a co-builder of the Panamanian railroad. The family crypt is architecturally impressive with brownstone arched doorways leading to the 130 square foot interior. Three rows of stacked vaults house 17 members of the Chauncey family dating from 1821 to 1979.

The state archeologist and a team of students and avocational archeologists entered the crypt to identify and interpret human remains and material culture disturbed by the vandalism. Four vaults had been clearly violated. The crypt’s marble-tiled floor was littered with disarticulated skeletal remains, wooden and cast-iron coffin fragments, burial clothing, casket linen, and hardware

Chauncey Family Crypt, Indian Hill Cemetery, Middletown, Connecticut. Photo by the author.





*Vandalized
Gravestone for
Lucy Alsop
Chauncey resting
on the Floor of the
Interior of
Chauncey Family
Crypt. Photo by
Middletown, CT
Police Dept.*

from the desecrated burials.

In order to facilitate the recording of the spatial distribution of the human remains and coffin parts scattered within the crypt, a modified archeological grid system was

devised. A wooden frame, constructed and elevated by corner posts over the crypt floor, provided pertinent datum points for subsequent field measurements. A gasoline-powered generator and several large flood lights were installed for adequate lighting. Once in place, standard archeological field methods for the recording of human remains and material culture enabled the controlled recording of horizontal and vertical provenience in order to determine the spatial orientation and relationship of the vandalized burials.

Skeletal remains of four individuals ranging in age from 2 to 68 years at death were documented *in situ* on the crypt's floor and subsequently sorted in order to develop a sequence of criminal activity and to restore the remains to their appropriate burial vaults upon completion of our investigation. In this process, it was established that the cranium discovered in Cromwell was that of Lucy Alsop Chauncey, who died in 1855 at 56 years of age.

Based on the horizontal and vertical distribution of osteological remains, coffin parts, and funerary remains on the crypt floor, the Office of State Archaeology was able to reconstruct the probable sequence of events for the criminal activities. Skeletal elements for all of the individuals whose vaults had been violated were accounted for in the crypt with the one exception of Mrs. Chauncey's cranium. The degree of decomposition of her post-cranial remains were consistent with that of the cranium and the mandible fit into the temporal-mandibular fossa. The archeological recovery of jewelry and other objects of monetary value as well as the haphazard manner in which human and coffin remains were scattered throughout the crypt appeared to eliminate burglary as a motive for the vandalism. There was no indication of any systematic search for artifacts which one would expect if the vandals were looking for material to sell or collect. While we cannot positively account for what else may have been removed, we are absolutely confident that the cranium that was

recovered by the police was removed from Lucy Chauncey's crypt, supporting the contention that satanic cult activity may have been a possible motive.

With the evidence from the forensic archeology at the Chauncey family crypt, Middletown Police arrested a suspect, of known satanic cult involvement, for the robbery of a gun store. This individual was taken into custody in lieu of \$10,000 bond following his arrest and was arraigned on four counts of interfering with a cemetery or grave site, one count each of third-degree burglary, first-degree criminal mischief and sixth-degree larceny.

Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies are recognizing the importance of establishing an investigative partnership with archeologists and anthropologists in their efforts to collect physical evidence from crime scenes whenever human remains are involved. Archeological field techniques have been designed to maximize the information retrievable from a given site where ostensibly very little cultural material remains exist for analysis. The application of archeological research methodologies to a criminal investigation will result in a greater degree of accuracy in the location of physical evidence and the best assurance for the recovery of materials and remains that may otherwise be lost. Archeologists are seldom familiar with criminal investigation procedures and require the supervision of a professional criminal investigator. Likewise, the criminal investigator may not be aware of the sophisticated techniques and analyses archeologists can provide. Archeologists need to familiarize themselves with state and local legislation regarding forensic applications of their work as well as the appropriate state cultural resource managers with mandates to oversee such investigations. Cooperative partnerships between law enforcement agencies and archeologists and anthropologists, like the successful case of the Chauncey family crypt, will result in the improvement of forensic sciences and hopefully, successful prosecutions at the community and state judicial levels.

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